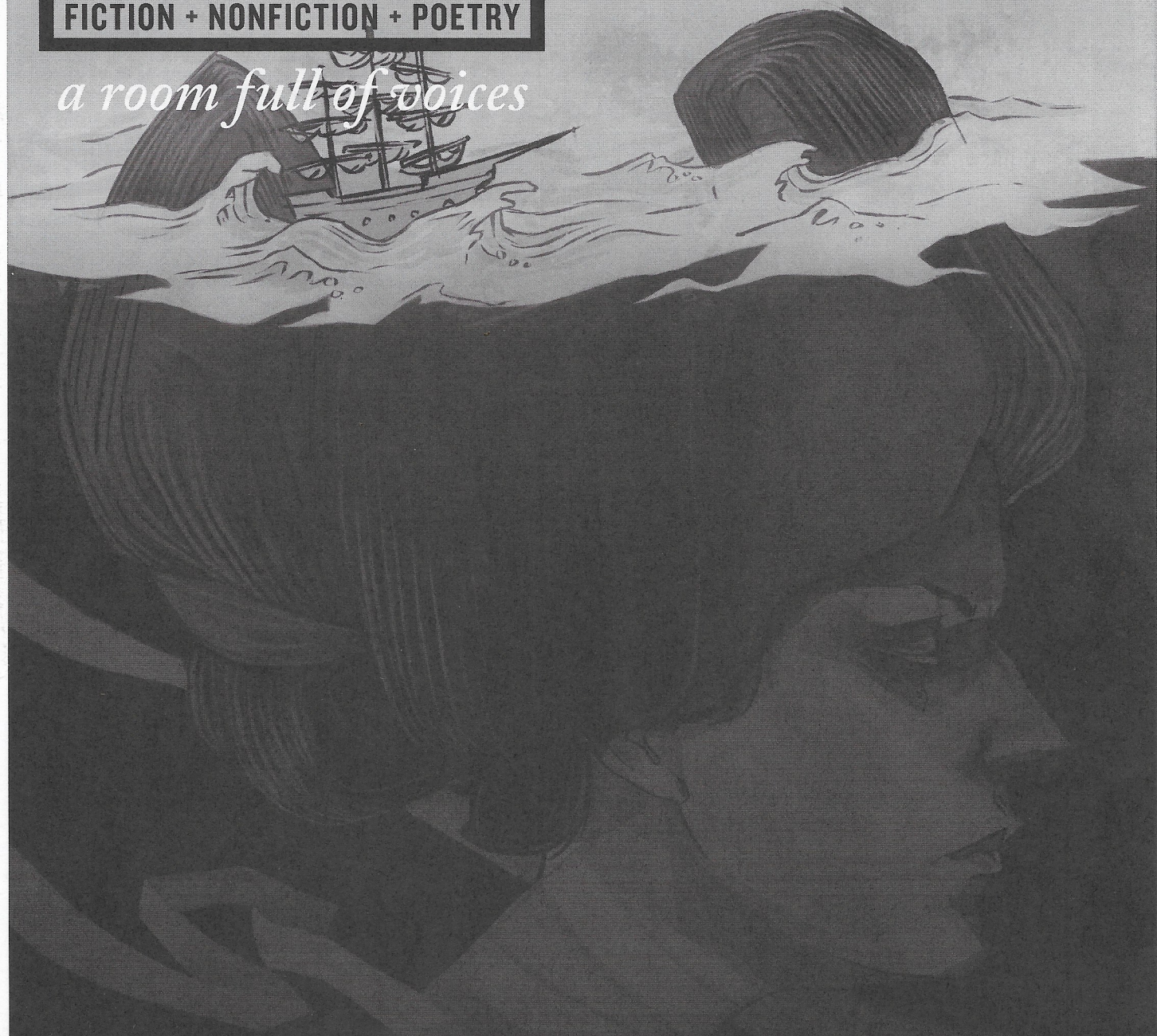


SLICE

FICTION + NONFICTION + POETRY

a room full of voices

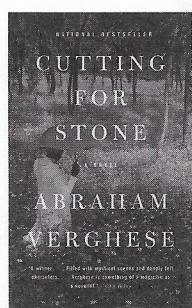


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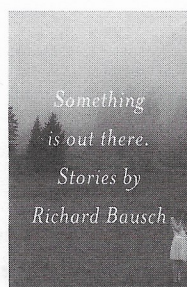
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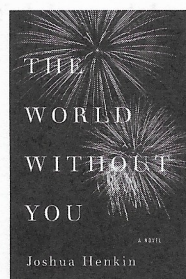
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SHOW ME

CHIN-SUN LEE

Everything was going pretty well, up until the Hula-Hoop contest. They were on their third round of margaritas, and Sara was at that perfect level of buzz, where the conversation and music around her thrummed so evenly she hardly heard either, and she wasn't even aware she was smiling—she only knew she felt good. Outside, snow had started to fall in light scattered flurries, but inside The Broken Sombrero, it could have been spring break.

Dean had started out across the booth, but a few minutes later he scooted over to her side like it was the most natural thing in the world to do. She moved to make room for him in the narrow space, and soon his T-shirt-clad bicep rested heavy and warm against her shoulder. Sitting so close, he seemed taller and bigger than when she'd first met him by the bar. She looked down at how skinny her thigh looked next to his and felt confined and small, but in a good way. Her roommate, Lucy, was long gone. Sara had given her the I-can-take-it-from-here sign, and it was seamless, really, how he'd steered her by the elbow and said into her ear, "Look, there's an empty booth, let's go get it."

Who cared that he was a "spiritual healer" or whatever they called them? Her mother would have smirked and called him a gypsy, a swindler—archaic words only she

used. But secretly, she would also have been afraid. Sara knew all too well that in the realm of the unknown, her mother was equal parts skeptical and obsessive. Traits which Sara resented inheriting. Even now, three thousand miles and six years away, she felt the tug of her mother's unwanted guidance, her judgments overlapping Sara's own like alternating cue cards: *This one is trouble*, read one, and then the other, *Let's see*.

When Dean told her what he did, she blurted out something stupid, like "Oh wow, that's different," but he didn't seem to take offense. Nor did he ask her what she did, sparing her the bother of her usual line: "Marketing, whatever the fuck that is." It was just as well, since he didn't strike her as the type you'd say "fuck" around—which had less to do with him being uptight than just very, very mellow. He told her how he read people's energies and grounded them, New Age-speak that made her feel embarrassed for him, and dismayed for herself. What was it about her that attracted the freaks? There'd been the impotent drummer, the meth-abusing chef, the banker with a foot fetish . . . even when they were good-looking, there was always something wrong. So this would be just a flirtation. But she hadn't even had one of those in a while,

and she liked the sound of his voice, smooth as low-pile velvet; what you'd expect, she supposed, for someone in his line of work.

"Okay," he said to her in that voice, "which hand do you use the most?"

"My right one." Which happened to be next to his, splayed flat across the red-checked tablecloth.

"Give me your other one, then," he said, reaching for it. She shifted her body to face him, and he turned to her at the same time. "You have nice hands. Elegant. That's what made me notice you." It was an offbeat compliment, too much so, perhaps, too pointedly asserting, *I am not your average guy obsessed with the usual female parts*. She let it go because up close his eyes were amazing—not for their color, which she couldn't quite distinguish, but for their shape, clear-cut and almost rectangular, crinkling slightly at the corners. Around them were dark lashes with some light ones mixed in, like the smooth hair he tucked behind his ears. She stared at his mouth, at the deep valley in the center of his upper lip. His thumb felt powdery and smooth as he rubbed it back and forth across the top of her hand, tracing over each knuckle lightly. She didn't think such a small thing could lift the hairs off her forearm, but it did. And then, just when she was feeling about as liquid and warm as a man could make her, he turned his head away. "Oh look, they're starting the Hula-Hoop contest."

She heard the screech of feedback and followed his gaze. Near the kitchen, about ten feet away, one of the bartenders was making some announcement through a mike. He had a row of Hula-Hoops hooked on his left arm, all the way from wrist to elbow, in multiple colors and sizes.

"What's that?" she asked, though she really didn't care.

"It's this thing they do on Thursdays. Whoever goes the longest gets a free pitcher and a T-shirt. Girls only." He let go of her hand and watched as the bartender placed a skinny pink hoop around the first contestant, a short Latin girl, who gave it a twirl and started moving her hips. People around them clapped and hooted.

"Oh." She didn't know what else to say, or why he was so interested. And how many Thursdays did he come here anyway?

He looked back at her and said, "Why don't you get up there?"

"Yeah, right." When she was ten years old, her skinny little hips could keep a Hula-Hoop spinning while she ate a tuna fish sandwich. Sometimes, even now, she felt inspired to move around by herself and dance. She's stopped in the middle of vacuuming to watch herself gyrating in the mirror—to Britney Spears, no less—and thought she wasn't too bad. But the idea of performing in front of these people was as unthinkable as stripping naked.

"Why not? Come on, let's see you."

She shook her head emphatically. "Sorry."

He squinted at her and shrugged. "Maybe some other time. Or some other place." This last bit he said with a smile, putting things back on the right track. He picked up her hand again and played with it idly. But soon his focus shifted back to the contest. The Latin girl had gone for six twirls, and then another girl took her place. This girl was taller, with a big chest and blond newscaster hair. She looked pretty wasted, which her performance confirmed; her Hula-Hoop clattered to the floor after two sloppy rotations. As Dean laughed, his eyes met Sara's and he grimaced, but not in a mean way.

Now a new girl walked up to the bartender and picked out a neon-green hoop. She was dark-skinned and slender, with a mass of curly hair and a small, pretty face, curiously enhanced by an arched nose. She wore a skimpy yellow tee that just revealed her belly button, and some low-riding camouflage pants. She stepped into the circle of her hoop with ease and placed it around her hips; then, twisting her body one way, she twirled the hoop in the opposite direction and began to move. The hoop went around and around her hips, swaying in a tight, precise orbit. Sara could hear the *swoosh* of the beads rushing inside the plastic tube, and the sound was hypnotic. The girl's stomach clenched and rippled, and her arms spread outward, exposing the taut veins and tendons of her inner wrists.

Sara saw Dean staring at her and felt a pang of distress, followed by chagrin. How could she feel jealous about someone she'd just met? She looked back at the girl, who continued to move, her hands lifting and pushing against the air. The bartender broke the spell by announcing how many twirls she'd gone so far . . . she was up to thirty and the record was thirty-seven, he said, and now the crowd began to count out loud. The girl lifted her head and shook

her hair off her face, keeping her eyes half-closed, but Sara saw the trace of a smile play around her lips, and people were counting, even Sara was counting, thirty-six, thirty-seven, thirty-eight!—and she kept going—thirty-nine, forty . . . she went all the way to fifty, and then, abruptly, gripped the hoop in her hands and stopped. The whole place went wild, stomping and cheering for her. The bartender handed her a colorful tee and yelled into the mike, “It looks like we have a new champion! Where’s your party, honey, we’re sending a pitcher over.”

A tall young man broke apart from the crowd to give the girl a big kiss. She draped her prize tee around his neck, and taking his hand, headed back toward the bar. She wasn’t even perspiring. As the crowd settled down, Dean turned his attention back to Sara. “Well, what do you think of that?” She just stared at him and shook her head, genuinely speechless.

Finally she muttered, “Jesus.”

He leaned in and planted a kiss on her forehead. “You look adorable right now, you know that?”

She flushed with pleasure and surprise. “No,” she said, and then, fishing for more, “—what do you mean?”

He placed his hands on each side of her face and brought his own up close. “I’ll show you,” he whispered, and then he kissed her for real.

« • »

Sara has transformed her memory of the first

boy she ever kissed from one of shame to amusement.

In the version she’s told her friends, and drunken new acquaintances at parties, even one or two exes, the details are all factual. She was a high school junior who’d crashed a USC frat party and ended up drinking kamikazes with a lean, dark-haired boy. At some point she found herself alone with him in the house basement. It was so dark she could barely see him, but she knew he was going to kiss her. With terror and anticipation, she looked up at the shape of his head approaching hers in a dreamy, slow descent. She opened her mouth, but there was nothing slow or dreamlike about the darting tongue probing hers in quick, lizard-like motions. She felt oddly mixed sensations: wet saliva, and the dry, rough texture of his tongue. When

he pulled away, she said, “Oh! That’s it?” He knew she didn’t mean she wanted more.

“So then,” Sara would say, laughing, “he just turned on his heel and never came back.”

The story illustrated what Sara knew she projected, a foot-in-the-mouth kind of bluntness, one she was able to see in herself and laugh at. What it did not convey was the sting she’d felt at the young man’s dismissal of her—as if she’d been the disappointment and not he. When she had realized he was not coming back, pique and mortification had given way to panic. She had no idea how to navigate her way out of the darkened maze of corridors he’d led her through. Why had she followed him there anyway? He could have done anything to her, had probably planned to, only she’d been too disgusting to bother. She felt along the walls and started moving in the general direction he’d gone, finally finding her way back to the party by following the thumping noise.

She got her friends to drive her home just before her midnight curfew. Her mother was still up, waiting for her. She took one look at Sara and said, “I don’t even have to ask what you’ve been up to. How much have you had to drink?”

Sara giggled then, a little freaked out at her mother’s intuition. Especially considering the woman never drank. Never did much of anything, really, except make a martyr of herself at home, and probably at work too. For much of her childhood, Sara had fretted over her mother, widowed so young, all her prettiness tamped down from sorrow and efficiency. Over time, her sympathy had dried up. Her mother’s level of apathy, she decided, was pathological. She’d been more of a housekeeper all these years than a mother, and though she’d begun to monitor Sara’s actions of late, her reasons for doing so seemed less about maternal concern than about justifying her endless suspicions. Because of this, Sara for the most part played by the rules; she refused to validate her mother’s expectations by becoming a rebel.

Once she was caught, confrontations usually ended faster when Sara owned up to the truth. “Okay, there was this party . . . I had two drinks, that’s it. But I’m home on time.”

From three feet away, her mother assessed her with quivering nostrils, sniffing at her like an animal. “There were boys at this party?”

“Um, yeah.”

Her first year at NYU, Sara unburdened herself of everything: her ridiculous virginity, her oppressive sense of caution—even, finally, any residue of guilt at maneuvering her liberation. These days, visits home to see her mother were brief; phone calls even more so.

“You do know you can get things these days, diseases—”

“Oh Jesus—”

“—even from the most casual contact. You know that, right?”

“Really? Like what, holding hands? Playing footsies?” Having this conversation with her mother sober would have been bad enough; being drunk added an extra surreal and appalling dimension. They had never discussed anything related to sex before, and even if they’d made the attempt, there would have been nothing to talk about. At least, not until that night. Again she marveled at her mother’s timing, wondering if neurosis could actually produce psychic powers.

Her mother’s face had turned pink. “You’re fifteen years old. You don’t need me to spell it out for you.”

Sara had to laugh. “No, I would never expect that. I’d be in big trouble if I did.”

Her mother, as usual, failed to pick up on any irony. She only said, “So you know what I mean. Listen to what I’m saying. It’s for your own good.”

And Sara did listen, for the most part, until she left for college. Still, in those two-and-a-half years before Sara went away, her mother fixated on her social interactions, especially when boys were concerned. She was convinced

of a wantonness that did not exist. Such avid interest in her daughter’s life, when there had been little before, and in this one area, implied a personal connection that Sara didn’t like to think about. Something had either happened to her mother long ago—or else the absence of it had created this obsession. Her passivity, which had confounded Sara all her life, had now morphed into an outsized paranoia about her daughter’s safety.

In trying to dissect the reasons why, Sara considered her mother’s Albanian upbringing. Unfortunately, she knew little about that part of her mother’s history, save for one tiny but potent clue she had in the form of a memory: years ago, at a gathering in their home (had they really once had parties?), she’d overheard her father say to someone, “The first time I saw Elira’s picture, I fell instantly in love.” As a child, Sara had found his words enchanting. Later, when she tried to recall how her parents had been with each other, she realized that their arranged union might not, in fact, have been so romantic.

At uncharitable moments, Sara wondered about her mother, *Maybe she’s just sex-starved*. If so, she wasn’t doing much about it. So meticulous with her makeup in the past, she barely bothered with it now, though her personal grooming, at least, had not grown lax. She was in her early forties and still pretty, as Sara was pretty, in a petite, dark-haired, delicate way that was one degree shy of plain. If she could just make an effort to look and act normal, she might convince herself and others that she actually was.

Once, at the age of thirteen, Sara had approached her mother and, armed with all her research, quietly suggested that her mother might consider counseling. Somehow, with just a prolonged stare, her mother had made her feel amateurish and impertinent to the point of transgression. If she were really a good daughter, and not just a good girl, she might have tried harder. She considered what could happen if her mother were left alone; she told herself she shouldn’t leave her—but in the end, every school she applied to was on the East Coast.

Her first year at NYU, Sara unburdened herself of everything: her ridiculous virginity, her oppressive sense of caution—even, finally, any residue of guilt at maneuvering her liberation. These days, visits home to see her mother were brief; phone calls even more so. When her father was



alive, and until Sara turned seven, she'd been given a new doll for every birthday. Inevitably, she would place the old one on her bookshelf, to rest alongside its predecessors. It was terrible, but whenever she thought of her mother now at home, she pictured her with them—set aside and no longer useful, though not entirely forgotten.

« • »

When Dean flicked on the lights of his apartment,

Sara noticed two things: first, how bright the room was; second, the near-absence of any furniture. It was a small studio of whitewashed brick lit by harsh fluorescent ceiling bulbs. Two industrial-sized windows took up one wall. Some straw-colored mats were strewn across the rough wooden floors, loosely arranged around a small metal coffee table. There were books piled underneath it, and magazines spread out on top. At the farthest corner was a large unframed futon, neatly made up with gray sheets, and

next to that, a laptop hooked up to some speakers. It was such a stark contrast to what she'd been expecting (a dark cavern with candles and incense, maybe some Buddhas), it made her wonder if he really was a healer like he had said, or if he'd made it all up.

“So you just get robbed or something?”

He laughed. “No. I'm not really supposed to live here. It's a commercial space, but as long as I keep a low profile, no one really cares. It's temporary.” He didn't bother to elaborate, and she knew enough not to ask. He took his coat, boots, and socks off carefully, and walked over with them to his futon.

“Well, it's very Zen, so I guess that suits you.”

She regretted the words even as they left her mouth. Why did she continue to say stupid, demeaning things? He didn't respond, and for that she was grateful. Twenty minutes ago, holding his hand while they walked in the snow, he'd seemed the perfect combination of someone wonderfully new and yet familiar. She had the memory of

his recent kiss, the details of which were fuzzy but nonetheless left an impression of lingering warmth. She'd hoped he might kiss her again while they walked, but he hadn't. Now, as he sat and fiddled with his laptop, he seemed completely removed from her. She stood a few feet away, unsure what to do. Sitting on the futon with him felt overly intimate, while the mats seemed too far away. The lights above her were so bright she could see lint balls all over her black coat. She picked at them and tried not to think about the blemish she'd concealed on her chin.

He glanced up from his laptop and smiled at her. "Hello," he said simply. Some kind of languid, Eastern trip-hop came softly through the speakers. She heard the sound of sitars in the background, and the rush of contempt she felt allowed her to relax.

She smiled. "Hello yourself."

"Are you cold?" he asked, pointing at her coat.

"Oh." She peeled it off, draping it over her arm.

"Where should I put it?"

"I'll take it."

She walked over and handed it to him. He tossed it lightly next to his coat and leaned back, letting his elbows support his weight.

"Should I take my shoes off too?" She tried to sound flirtatious. The lights in the room were so bright.

"If you want to."

She wasn't sure how she should take that. His voice gave away nothing. It occurred to her that he could be cruel. She thought of her mother's constant admonition: *You need to stop being so trusting*. But on the contrary, Sara was ruled by doubt. Almost every situation for her contained the smear of suspicion. When things went wrong, it had nothing to do with trust or innocence or lack of preparation. Being prepared couldn't protect you from the fact that sometimes things turned out exactly as expected. Besides, she was capable of cruelty too; you could say all she needed was a little push.

She bent down with a shrug, hoping to convey defiance, and began to unzip her ankle boots. She removed them, balancing on one leg, and then the other. Her socks were slightly damp; she considered keeping them on but thought, *What for? Eventually, they would come off anyway.*

Wasn't that why she was here? She stuffed her socks deep into the boots, straightened, and kicked them away.

"So. Should I sit? Or do you prefer that I kneel?"

"Actually, I like looking at you like that."

Heat flared into her face, surprising her. She put her palms up to her cheeks to cool them. "Well, I feel kind of lame just standing here."

He chuckled. "Okay, then why don't you dance?"

"What?"

"Dance for me. I want to see how you move." It should have sounded sexy, but it didn't—not the way he said it. He saw her frown and adopted a light, cajoling tone. "Come on. It's not a big deal. Just close your eyes and listen to the music. Let yourself go, pretend I'm not here."

Closing her eyes was easy. She pictured the dark, slender girl with the Hula-Hoop, the fluid, oiled rhythm of her hips. She tried to focus on the music, but its insistent, undulating tempo was so blatantly seductive it bordered on parody. She would have laughed, except she was too angry. Her earlier contempt returned, only this time, she was a part of it. Her toes gripped the cold wooden floor . . . she imagined stepping over it lightly, carelessly, gracefully. But even if her legs could have managed, her arms felt rigid and heavy. She couldn't do it, even if she wanted to, and she didn't want to. She opened her eyes and shook her head. "I don't think so."

"What is it?" he asked softly. "You're so self-conscious. It's really painful to see."

The walls of her chest seemed to contract. She sucked in a gust of air, and it stayed lodged in her throat. Above the music, she heard the faint *whirr* of the fluorescent bulbs flickering. His gaze held her, and it was like he could see right through her—worse, as if he'd snatched her own eyes to do it. At last she felt herself exhale, air blowing wet through her nostrils. To her horror, a tear leaked out and rolled down her cheek. She wiped at it roughly. Then she walked to the foot of the bed and grabbed her coat.

He reached over and held her by the wrist. She looked into his eyes, and saw—what? Triumph? Concern? They were brown, his eyes, she realized. Light brown. "Don't be mad," he said, and his voice, as always, was gentle. "Now we can begin to know each other." **CSL**